



637 Emerson Place, Severna Park, MD 21145 / Toll-Free 855.855.BEDA (2332) / 410.741.3037 FAX

Weight Stigma in Kids' Programs and Schools: Guidance for Kids' Programs Leaders

Youth programs are changing ***and you can be well positioned for those changes!*** Kudos to you for getting involved in the development of the next generation, however do you know how to put together a safe, weight bias free program? Do you know how to prevent weight stigma in groups of kids?

The following guidance is drawn from documents designed to reduce bias and stigma in national programs including Let's Move! and will be publically available near the end of the year, 2014. ***If you are managing a current program or you are developing a new one, here is a evidence based information you should know to lead, inspire and contribute to the health of your community.***

Weight Bias and Weight Stigma Are:

Weight bias is negative judgment based on weight, shape, and/or size. It fuels both explicit and implicit harmful actions by individuals and organizations, including social rejection, bullying, hate-speech, "fat jokes", and exclusionary behaviors that create inequities in social access, employment, healthcare, and education.

Weight stigma is what a person experiences when weight bias is internalized as being 'deserved'.

Why Should I be Concerned about Weight Bias and Weight Stigma?

Significant data has shown that demoralization about size leads to poor nutrition and fitness choices, diminished health, and weight gain, the exact opposite of what kids program intend to instill. With guidance, you can develop a program to support kids in a healthy, positive way that prevents weight stigma. With sound information, you can prevent weight bias and weight stigma in our schools, communities, and families.



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When Do Weight Bias and Weight Stigma Occur?

- Kids hear messages classifying people as “healthy” or “unhealthy” based solely on size.
- Kids are fed different types of snacks based on their appearance.
- Kids’ bodies are compared to others’ as well as to standardized ideals.
- Kids are allowed to bully, taunt, and tease one another based on size.
- Kids are not corrected when they use language that rejects the natural diversity of shape and size.
- Adults focus on gym-related activities and do not incorporate, in creative ways, fun and meaningful activities that embody cultural values, such as tribal dances or community gardening.
- Adults endorse negative body image or body shame when speaking about themselves and others – *“I’m so fat...”, “He should eat a cheeseburger...”, “She doesn’t need a sandwich – she needs a salad...”*
- People rate themselves against strangers – *“At least I don’t look like her...”*

How Can I Prevent Weight Bias and Weight Stigma?

- Do not implement weight loss competitions – Biggest Loser style competitions
- Promote healthy behaviors equally for everyone, without regard to preventing or promoting a size.
Eating well and staying fit are as important for an average sized child as a larger one!
- Help kids shift focus from weight to behaviors, such as eating well and being active.
- Educate kids that “dieting” and food restriction for the purpose of weight loss are not effective long-term strategies and may lead to weight gain.
- Model acceptance of all sizes and shapes, rather than one ideal body type.



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Get to Know the MYTHS AND FACTS About Health and Weight!

It can be hard to separate fact from myth when the goal is a “healthy weight.” The good news is that we know quite a bit about what promotes health in kids and adults. Here are just a few examples...

MYTH: Kids who don’t “look fit” need intervention, and kids who do “look fit” do not need intervention.

FACT: Health is much more complex than weight or body size. In reality, there are healthy and unhealthy people all across the weight spectrum.

MYTH: Body size is the result of motivation, education, or self-discipline.

FACT: A person’s body size is the result of many factors, including genetics, evolutionary adaptation, their immediate environment, the larger environment, stress level, lifestyle choices (including eating, movement and sleep habits), access to information, resources, and support—and the interactions of all of these.

MYTH: All kids can and should move the same amount and in the same way.

FACT: There are many factors that influence a child’s physical activity needs and abilities. Because of this, all kids should be encouraged to experiment with different kinds of movement to identify which types they enjoy. The more fun a movement is, the more likely we are to do it!

MYTH: A little shame can be an effective motivator for healthy choices.

FACT: Just the opposite!

When kids hear messages that shame, blame, or label, it actually decreases their desire and ability to engage in healthy behaviors. It also increases the probability of unhealthy behaviors, such as isolating oneself, avoiding physical activity and condoning bullying behaviors.

(Additional facts about children and weight, weight stigma and bias can be found in journal articles written by Puhl et al 2012, Puhl et Latner 2007 and from , Body Respect , Bacon et Aphramor 2014)



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Keep the DOs AND DON'Ts OF Movement High on Your List!

DO ask the kids what type of movement they enjoy or encourage experimenting with different types of movement to find one they can enjoy.

DO take cues from the cultures found within your community – are there activities and movement that are abundant in that culture? If so, work with those cultural norms.

DO consult a fitness professional to support your program who is ***trained to work with a diverse range of ages, abilities*** and embraces a weight neutral perspective

DO use movement that can be applied to activities of daily living (helping with housework, washing a car, walking the dog). ***All of this*** helps kids realize that “exercise” and “life” are not mutually exclusive.

DO create teams equally – encourage kids to make bias and stigma free choices.

DO circle back and ask the higher-weight kids to tell you if they feel stigmatized in any way.

DO NOT engage in weight loss competitions.

DO NOT weigh and measure! Teaching the kids to treat their bodies well is the #1 goal.

DO NOT motivate with shame or harsh language.

DO NOT administer standardized fitness tests. The goal is movement and all movement counts.

DO NOT use language that demeans the movement process.

DO NOT stand over the child while he/she is performing the movement. Instead, engage with them so that they can mirror your motion.

DO NOT post numbers but instead post the type of activity performed.

DO NOT exclude any child unless there is an injury.

DO NOT recommend or administer more movement for higher weight kids.



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Written by Lisa Tealer

Lisa M. Tealer is a veteran corporate diversity and inclusion professional, fat activist, community health advocate, former aerobics instructor, former health club owner and plus size model. She was on the Board and Director of Programs for [NAAFA](#) from 2006 to 2013, when she retired and now is Board Member Emeritus. She continues to work with NAAFA on special projects. Founded in 1969, NAAFA is a non-profit civil rights organization dedicated to ending size discrimination. She has lead several projects for the organization, including NAAFA's Size Diversity Toolkit, [Guidelines for Healthcare providers who Treat Fat Patients](#), [Guidelines for Fitness Professionals Who Serve Fat Clients](#) and NAAFA's Health At Every Size® Summit. In addition, Lisa was contributor and editor to [NAAFA's Child Advocacy Toolkit](#).

Edited by: Lizabeth Wesely-Casella